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AUTHOR Andrews, Richard L.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

School desegregation has added changes, uncertainty, and disruption to the factors already contributing to the public's declining confidence in public schools. Desegregation plans typically bring together two diverse communities--the white middle class and the minority poor--and often effect cataclysmic change. In this circumstance, the principal must remain strongly committed to desegregation, be willing to take risks in building a positive school climate, and make his or her personal presence felt. A positive school climate is generated when all parties work together toward a common purpose. Recognition for conscientious staff work with personal and public commendation and sharing of worthwhile ideas can reinforce cooperative teamwork. Other important principal behaviors include providing leadership, practicing active listening skills, and being highly visible in the school building. In the initial years of desegregating a school, discipline is an important issue. Parental involvement in determining discipline policy helps all to feel that the program is fair and consistent. Finally, principals must address the problem of white flight. There are several steps they can take to provide a positive busing experience and encourage families to stay in the district. (WD)

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THE ROLE OF THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL IN SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

Richard L. Andrews
Associate Professor
Educational Administration
University of Washington

John Morefield, Principal
Dearborn Park Elementary School
Seattle, Washington

Searetha Smith, Principal
Martin Luther King Early Childhood Center
Seattle, Washington

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THE ROLE OF THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL IN SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

Over the past decade, there has been an increasing gap in educational credibility, with schools throughout the country coming under growing public attack and criticism. The elementary school principal, as the administrator the public most closely associates with the daily operation of the school system, is a critical element to public understanding and support for the schools. The principal's role is all the more crucial when it becomes necessary to implement decisions related to a politically sensitive issue such as school desegregation.

Although the public attack and criticism stems from many causes, five major factors have contributed to the credibility gap while at the same time making the school principal's job more complex and demanding.

First, the cost of public education has skyrocketed over the past decade. In 1970, the cost per pupil for public education was less than $800 per year; by 1980, that cost had risen to over $2,100 per year. This represents an increase in real dollars of nearly 40% ($800 in 1970 was equal to about $1,800 in real dollars in 1980). These escalating costs have caused schools to come under searching scrutiny and acerbic comments, particularly when scores on standardized achievement tests appear to be declining.

Second, school districts across the nation, particularly in urban and older suburban areas, have closed neighborhood elementary schools as a

response to pressures brought about by the decline in the birth rate, the mobility of the population, and the age of the residents in certain areas. The shrinking number of elementary schools has left the remaining schools serving larger geographic areas and more heterogeneous populations. The process used to select schools for closure has been viewed by large segments of the population as unjust, and thus has left in its wake alienated sections of the population.

Third, there has been an increase in assertiveness of teacher and administrator organizations. The drive for better pay and working conditions, albeit worthy, has resulted in the profession losing its "cloak of sanctity" and "dedicated public servant" image. Parents find their elected representatives more controlled by conflict and bargaining strategies, and by special interest groups than by rational, long-range educational plans or by history, tradition, and community values.

Fourth, there has been an apparent shift in societal values. As the cost of living has increased, the average citizen has had to make painful value choices between meeting immediate personal needs or investing more in school programs, continuing existing programs, increasing teacher and administrator salaries, or maintaining breadth in the school curriculum (viz., music, art, foreign language, science), particularly at the elementary school level.

Finally, in the past decade there has been a growth of social discontent, a general malaise, and a blaming of the schools for all of society's

ills. Initially, the discontent focused on the need to improve conditions of the poor and disadvantaged portions of the population. The response brought special programs, increased paperwork, and specialized staff, as well as increased compliance to externally imposed guidelines. It nurtured a distrust of governmental institutions, and an abandonment of the school as a melting pot. The discontent became translated into a reform movement designed to transform the schools into a culturally pluralistic playground for the creation of new purpose. Predictably, the reaction to the 1970s is the reformation of the 1980s, a movement that has cast the schoools as the battlefield for revival of new moralism.

Within this context, then, we add the phenomena of school desegregation, the changes necessitated by the implementation of a desegregation plan, and the uncertainty and disruption brought about by changing court decisions. The plan, once put into place, requires the elementary school principal to chart a course incongruous with 300 years of history. The conditions that have been imposed immediately create: (a) a new context, new expectations, and new fears; (b) a new community of students and parents with experiential and cultural differences, and (c) instability resulting from white flight and busing problems.

NEW CONTEXT, NEW EXPECTATIONS, AND NEW FEARS

School communities brought together in a desegregation plan are, for the most part, of two types. In one type the members, who are predominantly of the white middle class, have spent their entire lives in a state of personal and environmental congruence. The culture, ethos, and values of their families and communities have been the same as those of their schools, their principals, and their teachers. There has been an unspoken trust--a mutually acceptable distance--a way of doing business. In the other type, the members who are predominantly minority and/or poor, have spent their entire lives in a state of environmental and personal incongruence. Of particular interest here is the incongruence between the family, the community, and the local elementary school. The schools located in these neighborhoods may well represent places to be avoided. To this school community, the school may be viewed as little more than another institution of repression.

In both of these situations, the relationship between the community and the school becomes apparent only when the principal's day is punctuated by occasional parent complaint or praise about what is happening to their child, or when small coalitions of parents apply pressure to achieve minor concessions from the school. The principals in these schools are ostensibly free from environmental intrusions and can guide the school as they see fit. Ironically, these two communities are most likely to be brought together into the same school community in the desegregation plan.

School segregation is an event that can bring about cataclysmic change in these communities. The linking of these two school communities shakes the very core of the relationship between the community and "its" school. In the predominantly white middle class community, the trust has been broken; in the minority community, the fear of greater incongruence has been increased.

These once-placid neighborhoods are agitated into a state of turbulence that threatens to destroy everything in its path--you as principal, your staff, and your school. The very context in which you must do your-job has dramatically changed. The change brings with it new expectations and new fears. Yesterday, you quietly administered a well-ordered school; today you must take bold, risky moves that can heighten the frustration and increase the turmoil. So, how is this to be avoided? There are no foolproof solutions, but careful attention to your own commitments, your willingness to take risks in building a positive climate in the school, and your personal presence can make the difference between success and failure.

COMMITMENT

First, it is absolutely essential for the principal to believe that quality, integrated education is better for children than a segregated education. If you are <u>not</u> commited to this belief--seek another assignment! Your belief or non-belief will be reflected in the behavior you exhibit. If you believe in desegregation and behave accordingly, the message will be clear, but if you do not believe in desegregation--see it

as just another burdensome federal intrusion or, worse, a violation of personal rights--the message will be equally clear. Others will pick up the cues--students, staff, parents--and flame the fires of turbulence. Your commitment alone will not guarantee successful desegregation, but the lack of it can guarantee the failure of a school's desegregation and subsequent integration. Principals must believe that a child's education will be enhanced by creating quality schools that have students, parents, and teachers of varied racial, cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds.

RISK TAKING

Principals of successfully desegregated schools must be inveterate risk takers. They are confronted, almost daily, with decisions to take or not to take risks. Taking risks can panic anyone--the greater the risk, the greater the fear. Haggling with the boss for better service is nothing new; fighting unfair regulations is routine; defending against injustice is ongoing. However, haggling for better desegregation services with the boss--who fought desegregation through the courts and may be dragging his feet to implement desegregation--is new. You, as principal must be able to place the goals and ideals of desegregation, integration, and the special focus of your school over your personal well-being. You must be willing to accept that your commitment and the risks you take to implement a successfully desegregated school could cost you your job and desired future promotions in your school district. There will be those all around

you who do not make the commitment or take the risks, and furthermore may chide or even shun you for your actions; they will, however, at least in the short run, maintain harmony with the community.

SCHOOL CLIMATE

The climate of the school is extremely important to its desegregation. The "pulse" or "feel" once inside the building can determine success or failure. Since the new parents feel very much like "strangers in a strange land," their introduction into the school must be designed to reduce the anxiety created by the new experience. If this first introduction is not a positive one, they will leave and not come back. Although there is little, if anything, that you can do to create a positive experience for those who come intending to have a negative experience, there are some very specific things that you can do to make a warm and inviting school climate.

There are two dimensions to climate. The first is visual, which creates the first impression and allows alienated or anxious students and parents to shed their "strangers in a strange land" feeling and to begin to feel at home--welcome, comfortable, at ease, and free to be themselves. The school building itself is the most visible, tangible indicator of the "first feel" of the school.

Most of us do not have beautiful new buildings; thus, making the most of what we have is essential. Remember, some of these students now bused to your school had newer buildings that they were bused from! We, as

principals must, through the creation of an aesthetically pleasing and comfortable setting, lead parents, staff, and students to a positive orientation of the new physical setting. Bright paintings and graphics help brighten drab areas, but they alone do not create the necessary "feel." The physical environment must be alive with the productive aspects of the school--children's creative writings, art work, familiar books and posters. But these things are just symbols of a positive climate and may, like grocery stores' "loss leaders," get people into the store. Other ways must be found to keep them there.

The second dimension of school climate is designed to do just that--keep them there, which is much harder to achieve than the visual dimension. To keep them, you must convince parents that their children will receive quality education, so that they will be willing to make an investment and actively participate in the school's activities and in their children's education. A positive school climate is generated when all parties work together toward a common purpose, and communicate a message that says "We care"--we care not only about the physical school environment but also about the people inside. The first step in creating this caring environment is to obtain the commitment of staff to the common focus for the school, developed cooperatively with the community (discussed later).

As the second step, you and your staff must be aware of and sensitive to human relations needs. There is an open channel of communication between principal and staff on problems, issues, or conflicts that require resolution. There must be demonstrated acceptance and appreciation for the

differences in teacher styles and needs. Staff members must view the principal as an accessible, dependable support system for program implementation. They must believe that their personal effectiveness plays an important part in the success of the overall school plan.

All personnel in the school must act as a team in assuming responsibility for contributing to the overall quality of the school--a sense of everyone belonging. Principals must recognize staff members' conscientious work by frequent personal and public commendations, expressions of approval, peer sharing of great ideas, feedback of parental approval, and by many other forms of positive reinforcement. This will encourage a feeling of success and pride, which will result in the desire to perform at the highest possible levels. This positive attitude will transfer to other staff members as well as to students and parents. These attitudes about success and excitement about the program will lead to the development of staff cooperation and will result in schools with overall high standards and quality.

Even with all of these good things, however, conflicts will arise that will tend to destroy these efforts. This is a fact of life. Although most of us view conflict in negative terms, it is out of conflict that some of the most positive solutions arise. This is particularly true in school desegregation, a fact that principals need to recognize and utilize. Name calling <u>will</u> happen. Students <u>will</u> get into fights. Teachers <u>will</u> be frustrated and get into arguments. The issues of race and racism <u>will</u> occur. The question is not whether conflict will occur, but rather how to

deal with it when it does. As building leaders we must provide leadership for doing so. We must not shy away from conflict, but must embrace it as a vehicle for change; we must utilize these conflicts as catalysts for needed reform. If name calling is a significant problem, then group sessions, workshops, disciplinary measures, etc. are needed to focus on the resolution of this problem. It must not be just ignored or suppressed--it will only come back again. Schools with positive climates are not necessarily those with no conflicts--such schools do not exist. Positive, healthy schools approach conflict without fear and with determination to follow through to resolution.

CREATING THE PRINCIPAL'S PRESENCE

An impressive body of research suggests that the principal sets the tone for the school. Your presence must be keenly felt if successful desegregation is to take place. One of your essential responsibilities is to influence behavior so that people can accomplish tasks at a high level of productivity and success. Your presence can be felt in a number of ways. You must be a vigorous educational leader who:

- regularly visits classrooms, evaluating and making suggestions for improving instruction;
- holds teachers accountable for student-performance-based changes in classroom practices;
- holds teachers accountable for nurturing each child to excel at his or her highest level;

- o holds teachers accountable for maintaining one standard for all children without regard to race;
- o evaluates teachers on the basis of how they fit into the overall plan of the school; and
- o holds as a first commitment the delivery of a quality educational program for children.

However, simply providing rigorous instructional leadership is not enough. Principals must also exhibit certain behavior each day as they work with people in their schools. Important characteristics are enthusiasm, active listening, modeling, and accessibility. The behavior of a creative, motivated, hardworking, and visible principal is contageous. Principals who are passive and negative will have boring and negative schools; principals who are vital and active generate that vitality in their schools. Because desegregation creates stress and negative feelings in all quarters--community, staff, and students--principals must be positive, outgoing, and enthusiastic. They set the tone of their schools, so it is up to them, by their actions, to generate enthusiasm in their schools.

The ability and willingness to listen effectively is perhaps <u>the</u> essential skill for principals involved in desegregation. Parents, students, and staff exhibit anger, frustration, resentment, and fear. Empathetic listening when faced with highly charged, volatile emotions is one sure way to facilitate change and bring a situation on a more even keel. Feelings created by actions of others (the school board, the superintendent, and

community groups) are often focused on principals who must help people work through these feelings--to identify the reasons for their feelings, and to help them arrive at effective solutions. This "counseling" function--now inherent in the role of the principal--models for others an effective way of helping. It encourages active listening throughout the school environment--teacher to teacher, teacher to student, and parent to child.

Some teachers have difficulty in continually demonstrating to children that they are important to them and that they care about them, but over time even the most "rigid" of teachers can learn to "loosen up" with children if it is the norm of the school. It becomes the norm of the school when the principal continually encourages and models genuine caring for children.

Students are more secure when they feel valued and cared for by adults. Since students recognize that the principal is the leader of the adults in the school setting, they want the caring and attention of that significant adult. Knowing all the students' names and a little about them facilitates closeness; treating students in a fair, consistent, firm, and caring way generates trust; spending time with them in the classroom, on the playground, in the lunchroom, at the buses, and after school, and talking and listening to their hurts and joys makes them feel worthwhile. Students feel that if the principal cares, they must be special people!

"Visible" principals are those who spend the vast majority of their time outside the office. Students, staff, and parents feel better when

they see principals regularly; it is a reassuring sign that all is well. But, in addition to visibility, principals must have accessibility. They must welcome contact, dialogue, and problem solving rather than avoid them. They must be viewed as highly approachable people. Children should be able to come to the principal because they want to, not because they have to. The door must be open for all to enter.

NEW STUDENTS, PARENTS AND COMMUNITY

In the past, when children first entered a school they came singly as kindergarteners, as siblings of other children in the school, or as new enrollees who recently moved to the neighborhood. With the desegregation plan, a sizeable number, possibly even a majority of the children enrolled in the school will arrive in a group consisting of individuals with the same former affiliations, experiences, and relationships. Historically, students were simply replacements of a like kind with the same ethnicity and socio-economic status as those who left the year before. They all resided in a fairly homogeneous, contiguous geographical area that was socially community-related with parents and students living together, going to church together, and shopping together. A newly desegregated school, however, is no longer a community defined as such. Instead, there is a community consisting of people whose only linkage to each other is the fact that their children attend the same school.

The children in the new community grew up in dramatically different circumstances and with vastly different experiences, cultures, and ethos.

Common and everyday experiences for one group can be unheard of or unanticipated experiences for another group. These children do not even play on the same playgrounds, belong to the same groups, or participate in the same activities. Their views of the world are not the same. Their gestures and the intensity of their gestures mean different things; they use different words, which sometimes have different meanings. No matter which group has been bused, they are not "street wise" in the new neighborhood. Instead of one "new kid on the block," up to one-half or more of the kids are "new on the block." It is easy to reshape one square peg to fit in with all the other round pegs, but it is quite another when there are equal numbers of round and square pegs. Which should be reshaped? Reshape them all by redesigning the school curriculum to be multi-cultural. Ethnicity should not be de-emphasized, but rather emphasized. Children should engage in values clarification activities so they will understand the value systems of others who are quite different from themselves.

The complete fabric of the new community is held together by the school. While this single thread is clearly a fragile basis upon which to build a community, we believe it is possible. But to do so requires that all members of the new community have a stake in the school and play an active part within that school in determining its overall focus, its discipline rules and procedures, and the nature of its curriculum.

The overall goal should be to open the schools so that the community members (those who are interested in children's education and in particular

the parents of those children currently in school) and the staff can work together to perform their roles based on knowledge and experience, thereby helping to determine what direction the school should take to improve the quality of education. These parents and their children have the most at stake because their futures will be determined to a great extent by their school experience.

Principals must provide visitation and orientation sessions to meet families who are new or potentially new to the school. Parents and children, regardless of differences in linguistic behavior, racial categories, traditional beliefs, customs and values, economic and social status, and gender must feel welcome. The school must be a place where parents and children are brought together with a sense of working together toward a common purpose. Parent involvement should be encouraged at all levels and in all activities of the school. Successfully desegregated schools must be places that are supported by visible parents who, in sending their children to the school, are committed to serving as partners in education to assure the future of the school.

FOCUS OF THE SCHOOL

Schools, like students, need direction in order to perform at their best. Many school communities desiring excellence have carefully and cooperatively developed policy statements that provide direction and special focus for the school. When a school is involved in a desegregation plan, these statements must be re-evaluated and rewritten--a process that

is both painful and time consuming. The parents who have traditionally sent their children to the school may well expect the new parents to just "plug in" to their ongoing school, but if the school is to relate to the new school community, those new parents cannot be expected to do so. It is essential to the successful desegregation of the school to form a new community.

DISCIPLINE

In the initial years of desegregating a school, mistrust of the system's discipline procedures is widespread. White families often fear violence and harm to their children and visualize administrators and teachers unable or unwilling to do anything about it. Minority families also fear violence and harm to their children and visualize racist attitudes and discriminatory behavior on the part of administrators and teachers. Discipline is a very important issue. In our experience, the more parents are involved in both determining the policy itself and in the implementation of discipline as it affects their children on an ongoing basis, the more comfortable and secure they feel.

Principals must work with staff, students, and parents to develop a policy that should include: (1) a precise philosophy statement, (2) positively stated student expectations, (3) clearly stated unacceptable student behavior, and (4) procedures and consequences to be expected for failure to abide by these rules.

Principals, teachers, and all others in contact with students at school must make sure that the policy is followed fairly and consistently and that the parents of children are informed and involved throughout the entire discipline process. This means a lot of phone calls to home or work; it means time-consuming conferences and creative problem solving; it means negotiations. Energetically following these discipline policies will, in time, help parents trust the school to be fair to all children. There must be a pervasive sense of fair play.

CURRICULUM

Principals must identify areas in need of program and curriculum development. In addition, with the overall goal of educational excellence foremost, they must support a process of teacher inservice to assure ongoing program excellence. Parents who desire quality education for their children are attracted to schools that emphasize excellence. A specific statement of philosophy with clearly outlined program goals must be developed and regularly updated so that parents and staff will have a common understanding of the educational program offered and its claim to excellence.

Programs must be developed that support non-sexist, multi-aged, multi-level, and multi-racial/ethnic groupings. Curriculum offerings should stress both process and higher level thinking skills, and should focus on individual differences in learning and teaching styles. Variations on the basic program should be offered, enhancing their appeal to the

varying needs and desires of parents, staff, and students. The overall program must have an emphasis that synthesizes cognitive, affective, and creative learning.

WHITE FLIGHT AND BUSING PROBLEMS

Rather than taking a leadership role in public schools as they have in the past, some people opt out of the public schools if their children are going to be bused across town. Studies on those who avoid their desegregation assignments show that they move to the suburbs, give the district fictitious addresses, or enroll their children in private schools or special special educational programs. White flight and desegregation avoidance is a fact of life; it is not a question of whether or not some parents are going to opt their children out of the desegregation plan--it is simply a matter of how many will do so.

There are two types who leave, those who leave before the first day of school, and those who will leave at the first unpleasant incident. School desegregation makes each problem at school or on the way home a critical incident, which can cause another family to leave, thus adding to the instability of the school.

School principals must minimize the numbers of those who leave. There is little that can be done about those who leave before school opens, but much can be done to create conditions favorable for those who give the

school a chance. Principals are not omnipotent. They cannot be everywhere monitoring all phases of the school at all times, and be all things to all people; but there are a number of things, in addition to those already mentioned, that they can do to reduce the number of families who leave the district.

For instance, a positive bus experience can be provided by:

1. Training bus drivers to work with children and parents, and monitoring carefully to be sure they function effectively once on the job. Everything can go perfectly at school but if there is trouble on the bus on the way home, it was not a good day.

2. Immediately notifying parents and promptly following up on bus concerns or problems. If the matter is simply ignored or followup is postponed, the problem will simply spread to other parents.

3. Greeting the buses daily and monitoring the loading of children onto the buses at the end of the day. Your presence as building principal creates an atmosphere that the buses are an extension of the school.

4. Providing bus drivers with referral forms for dealing with behavior problems on the bus, a copy of which goes home to the parent for signature.

5. Allowing parents, on a space available basis, to ride the desegregation buses with their children.

6. Working with the school district to provide a trial run for parents to ride the bus route before the opening day of school--a process that can

greatly reduce parental anxiety about their children's bus ride.

Attending to matters such as these will not eliminate all bus-related problems, but it may help to reduce the number of minor problems that can eventually cause parents to opt out of the desegregation program entirely.

Summary

These observations suggest that, at least in part, elementary school principals might well experience a failure of nerve and become captives of the community they serve. They may also become captives of their own personal perceptions regarding their jobs and the characteristics of the school system in which they serve.

To suggest that principals cannot overcome both external environmental circumstances and internal organizational obstacles in performing their work is demonstrably false. Some principals respond effectively to changes in their environment and are very successful. However, the evidence suggests that far fewer principals than we would like to believe are able to make the necessary adjustments. Although one can indulge in dialogue as to whether or not elementary school principals can be change agents, to do so is begging the issue.

Instead, the relevant issue is whether or not elementary school principals can learn the necessary conceptual, human, and technical skills, and also display the behavior requisite to create and maintain a quality school

under changing conditions in the school's environment. More specifically, the issue is whether it is possible to learn these skills and display the necessary behavior under the stressful conditions of school desegregation.

It is possible. Experience and study has shown that the presence of certain key ingredients in the principals' beliefs and actions ensures a greater chance of the development of a productive and healthy school in an environment altered by the phenomenon of school desegregation.

While school district support for staff development, conflict resolution, retention of local building autonomy, and resources to develop and maintain supportive relationships between parents and the school are most useful aids, they do not make the school. Ultimately, it seems that the fate of our schools depends on our willingness, in a dramatically changing context, to deliver quality education to young people. Since we, as principals, set the tone for our schools, it is up to us to guide them toward that end, keeping in mind that an environment where positive, meaningful things happen is only created by principals who chart for themselves an aggressive educational leadership role and actively engage in specific behavior that is characeristic of this approach.